

The Rural Engagement Program is committed to improving health care access for rural Texans, ensuring quality care reaches every community, regardless of location or resources.

Addressing Health Care Crisis in Rural Texas

Access to quality health care is simply not an option for many of the 4 million Texans who live in rural communities. Rural hospitals and clinics face several ongoing challenges including physician shortages, financial and operational challenges, limited access to specialists and a large percentage of uninsured patients.

This crisis has an economic impact which affects the workers and their families who make up the backbone of our state—including small business owners, ranchers, farmers and oil and gas employees all who need adequate health care in order to support the vital industries that drive our state.

As a land-grant institution, the Texas A&M Health Science Center is answering the call to address this health care crisis.

With initial funding from the 88th Texas Legislature, the HSC established the **Texas A&M Health Rural Engagement Program**—a coordinated, interdisciplinary initiative designed to strengthen health care access for rural Texans across the state. The **Texas A&M Rural and Community Health Institute**, the **Texas A&M University Naresh K. Vashisht College of Medicine**, the **Texas A&M University College of Nursing**, the **Texas A&M University Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy** and the **Texas A&M Health Telehealth Institute** are partners in this vital mission.

The accomplishments in the two years since the launch of the Rural Engagement Program demonstrate the success of this initiative in helping rural communities retain access to health care and grow the future health care workforce.

Providing Financial, Operational and Technical Support

Having served as a health extension center for more than 20 years, the Rural and Community Health Institute understands the unique health care challenges of rural and underserved communities. It has established technical support programs across 100 counties leading to measurable improvements in financial performance, service line growth, and the accelerated adoption of Value-Based Care initiatives.

Technical Assistance Coordinators travel statewide to rural health care facilities to identify, prioritize and implement strategies that promote financial sustainability. Together with local leadership teams and rural health industry experts, tailored action plans are created at no cost to the hospital/clinic. This hands-on approach ensures that improvements are not just recommended but are integrated into the daily operations of the health care centers that Rural and Community Health Institute serves.

Additionally, Workforce Coordinators collaborate with health care facilities, the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing and Pharmacy and local communities to establish rural rotations for medical, nursing and pharmacy students.

Inspiring the Next Generation of Physicians to Serve

As a founding member of the Rural Engagement Program, the Naresh K. Vashisht College of Medicine is dedicated to preparing the next generation of rural health care providers—leaders of character who will care for and advance the health of their communities. Through strategic partnerships with local stakeholders—including physicians, hospital administrators and community leaders—the Vashisht College of Medicine provides students with essential clinical training and a rich, immersive experience of life and practice in rural Texas intended to inspire young physicians to build their careers in these communities.

Recognizing the need to introduce rural K-12 students to health care careers, the K-12 Rural Outreach Program was developed. “School to Scrubs”, Mini Med Camps and ISD partnerships offer students the chance to explore careers in health care.

Educating Nurses to Care for Rural Texans

The College of Nursing is strengthening the rural nursing workforce and expanding access to care in medically underserved areas across Texas.

The state’s generous investment enabled the College of Nursing to formalize and expand its rural-focused efforts which include scholarship opportunities, curriculum enhancements and clinical training programs tailored to rural health care needs.

Currently, $375,000 in scholarship funds are available annually for rural nurses to pursue advanced degrees, and undergraduate nursing students have the opportunity to participate in a two-week rural immersion program in medically underserved communities across Texas.

Preparing Future Pharmacists to Serve Rural Texans

The Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy has a mission to develop and inspire leaders in pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical sciences through transformational education, innovative research, holistic care and effective outreach and service.

Through its partnership with the Rural Engagement Program, the College provided enhanced clinical training employment opportunities in rural communities across the Rio Grande Valley, the Coastal Bend, Houston, Round Rock, Temple and Bryan/College Station. During these rotations, students participate in a wide range of patient-centered activities, including prescription dispensing and immunization administration.

Bringing Valuable Care and Resources to Rural Texas

The Telehealth Institute advances interdisciplinary research, education and clinical services in telehealth. With a commitment to reduce disparities in access to high-quality health care for rural Texans, the Institute has increased behavioral health access for 18 rural communities. For two rural communities without health care facilities—Kenedy and Jeff Davis counties—shipping containers were transformed into fully functioning medical clinics equipped to provide both family medicine and behavioral health services.

The Institute also expanded its Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) programs. Via secure video connections, ECHO connects rural communities with a live panel of subject matter experts who provide guidance and support.

Providing OB Training to Rural Hospitals/Clinics

The Maternal Health Initiative—a program with the Rural and Community Health Institute—is focused on improving access to care, strengthening emergency response systems and supporting the long-term viability of rural obstetric services.

More than 60% of rural counties are classified as maternity care deserts, lacking a hospital birthing facility and having few, if any, obstetric providers. This new initiative includes three programs to address this disparity: rural prenatal program, rural ER OB simulation training and rural hospital OB service line evaluations.

Looking Ahead

With additional funding provided by the 89th Texas Legislature, this collaboration of physicians, nurses, health care educators and rural health leaders will broaden its impact through transformative projects directly benefiting rural Texas communities. The goal remains the same: to keep rural hospitals open, inspire health care professionals to build their careers in rural communities and to expand health care access for all of rural Texas.